Minimizing Risks at the Liturgy

Francis L. Agnoli

This essay applies the general principles regarding preventing infection from COVID-19 specifically to the Mass and to the public celebration of the rites of the Church. The approach described is not definitive but simply one to be considered. There is no such thing, however, as “safe” liturgy in the midst of a pandemic. Parishes can just try to ensure that the liturgy is “safer.”

WHAT DOES SAFER LOOK LIKE?

To celebrate the liturgy in a safer manner, parishes need to minimize the risk in practices and reduce the time that the community is together. These suggestions and others in this article may seem to be at odds with celebrating the liturgy well. A well-celebrated liturgy requires time to allow the symbols to speak. My hope remains that, even stripped bare, our liturgy still speaks to the heart and transforms the spirit because Christ has promised to be with us. Might I suggest that, by stripping away some elements, Christ’s presence—under the modes of assembly gathered, presiding minister, Word proclaimed, and Eucharistic Bread and Wine—will come into an even starker relief. And perhaps, in the midst of loss, something may be gained—if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Celebrating in a minimal manner will be a challenge to our priest celebrants and other liturgical ministers. With responses and singing curtailed and the wearing of a cloth face covering, it would be tempting to fall into the trap of ministering as if one were alone. Speaking slowly and distinctly, allowing for brief pauses, and good eye contact will go a long way toward avoiding this snare.

In some areas of the country, churches have been closed completely and are just now allowing for limited gatherings for baptisms, weddings, and funerals, or even weekday Masses. Other areas are moving into gathering for regular public worship, albeit in a modified fashion. The first part of this article will be a walk through the Mass with suggestions of practices for a safer liturgy, and in the second part, I will comment on what is particular in the other rites.

A WALK THROUGH THE MASS

The Introductory Rites

The entrance hymn and procession are omitted. Instrumental music may be played as the assembly gathers. From the chair, the priest goes to the altar, bows, and returns to the chair. The altar is not kissed, both for hygienic reasons and because it would make little sense to do so while wearing a face covering. (In regions where the kiss would be inappropriate, bishops’ conferences may substitute it with another gesture of reverence; the kiss, then, is not essential.) The entrance antiphon is recited, either by the priest or another minister; the assembly may repeat it. Incense is not used, as this would require extra time and might induce coughing.

From the chair, the presider makes the sign of the cross and greets the faithful. Any introduction to the day is either omitted or is brief. Of the options for the penitential act, the confiteor, due to length, is not recommended. Likewise, also avoided would be the sprinkling rite, since it would take
increased time and would bring the presider into the midst of the assembly. The Gloria is recited. The presider then prays the collect from the Missal, which would be on a stand next to the presider’s chair.

**Liturgy of the Word**

Generally, if there is an option, the shorter form of a reading should be chosen. Parishes may decide that only one reader should proclaim the readings, both to avoid more than one person handling the lectionary and to decrease the amount of movement. If the reader uses the lectionary, and the priest or deacon the *Book of the Gospels*, the use of a common object is eliminated. Keeping hand sanitizer at the ambo should be considered.

The alleluia and acclamation verse are considered to be a unit. According to the missal, the acclamation is required if two readings precede the Gospel (as on Sundays). In this case, a simple solution would be to recite it. For example, a minister says “Alleluia,” the people repeat it, the verse is spoken, and the people repeat the alleluia. A long procession and the use of incense should be avoided. If a deacon is present, he is blessed by the presider—at an appropriate distance. Reverencing the *Book of the Gospels* without a kiss is recommended.

Homilies need to be brief. If desired, a longer version of the homily may be made available on the parish website—either in written or recorded form. While a homily is required on Sundays and holydays, it may be omitted for a grave reason; it is recommended on weekdays.

The shorter Apostles’ Creed may replace the Nicene Creed as the profession of faith. Careful preparation and editing can decrease the length of the universal prayer and still pray for (1) the needs of the Church, (2) public authorities and the salvation of the whole world, (3) people burdened by any kind of difficulty, and (4) the local community, as the GIRM states.

**Liturgy of the Eucharist**

The preparation of the gifts and altar is simplified. The song or chant accompanying the preparation is omitted, as is the use of incense. If instrumental music is played, it must not extend beyond what is needed to accompany the action. A collection is not received. (Electronic giving should be stressed, and secured receptacles for donations can be placed near the entrance.) The priest (or deacon) brings what he needs from the credence table in the sanctuary. Preparing as many ciboria as will be needed avoids moving hosts to other vessels later; this prevents additional touch and saves time. The priest should use a single host for himself. The chalice may be prepared at the credence table if a deacon or concelebrant is present, each cleric should use (and later purify) his own chalice. The gifts should be left covered.

Due to its shorter length, Eucharistic Prayer II is preferred. The acclamations and Lord’s Prayer are spoken. The sign of peace may be omitted completely. Not only does this save time but it prevents people from falling into old habits. If the sign of peace is shared, it is done in a way that does not involve touch; a silent bow is suggested.

As the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions noted in their guidance for reopening parishes, the Communion Rite is an essential and unmovable element in the Order of Mass. Communion is distributed only under the form of consecrated bread and is not distributed on the tongue. Gloves are not necessary; hand sanitizer ought to be used before and after the rite, and if any inadvertent touch occurs during the rite.

The Communion antiphon is recited, either by the priest after he communes or by another minister as the priest communes. The people may join in the recitation. The challenge will be to maintain physical distancing and still have enough ministers of Communion to be able to distribute Communion in as short a time as possible. Determining the location of the stations for the ministers and the optimal route of the Communion procession may include some trial and error. Stations for the ministers of Communion at the back of the church may be necessary. If instrumental music is played during the procession, it must not extend beyond what is needed to accompany the action.

For the reception of Communion while wearing a mask, consider the following approach:

**The priest:** When he is ready to commune, he moves the cloth face covering aside with one hand and communes with the other, and then replaces his mask. Once done, he uses hand sanitizer and distributes Communion to the ministers. After handling the vessels to the other ministers, he distributes Communion to the assembly. (To avoid cross-contamination, use one hand to hold the vessel and the other to distribute.) A priest who is at high-risk for severe COVID-19 ought to consider leaving the distribution of Communion to other ministers.

**The faithful:** The faithful should use hand sanitizer before leaving their pew (households could bring their own; alternatively, the parish may want to set up a small table with hand sanitizer along the procession route). The minister is approached with the mask on.

To avoid touch while distributing Communion, the minister grasps the host by one edge and then places the opposite edge
just above or touching the palm of the communicant. The minister then releases, allowing the host to simply fall onto the palm. Once the minister moves their hand out of the way, the communicant steps to the side and picks up the host with the other hand. The person then moves the mask aside with the free hand, communions, and replaces the mask. Because their hand has been near their mouth, hand sanitizer should be used again.

Other ministers: Deacons and extraordinary ministers receive in similar fashion, purifying their hands, receiving their vessels, and then going to their place to distribute Communion.

In the interest of time, extra “blessings” should not be given. If a communicant presents without a mask, it would be prudent to avoid the ritual dialogue.

Concluding Rites
After the prayer after Communion, the announcements should include only what is essential or be omitted entirely. The parish website, electronic means of communication, or even traditional mailings are the primary ways to share information. A procession after the dismissal may be omitted. The faithful are dismissed by row so as to maintain social distancing. Instrumental music may accompany the procession (if there is one) and the departure of the assembly. Gatherings for socializing should not occur after Mass, and bulletins should not be handed out. Nothing should be taken home from the church.

CELEBRATING SACRAMENTS AND RITES
Postponed Celebrations
Preparation for many of the sacraments occurs in group settings—for example, children have been formed with their peers to receive first Communion, and catechumens have spent perhaps a year or longer together. Given the parameters of physical distancing, and the number of individuals involved, it may not be possible for those who prepared for the sacraments together to celebrate them as a group, especially as part of a parish liturgy. One option would be to schedule a specific liturgy or liturgies for the celebration of these sacraments. Another would be to include one or a few candidates for the sacraments at each Mass over the course of a week or more.

Baptism of Children
The baptism would involve only an infant or infants from a single family, and would only be celebrated outside of Mass. Rather than moving through the church, the entire rite takes place at the font. The signing of the infant takes place without touch by the minister; the parents alone trace the sign of the cross on the infant’s forehead. Because it is optional in the United States, the anointing with the oil of catechumens is omitted, and the alternate prayer is used. For the baptism itself, as fonts are empty, a pitcher of water is prepared. The water is blessed and then poured over the head of the infant and into the empty font (or other bowl). The water is later poured into the ground. A cotton ball is used for the anointing with chrism. The family should provide the white garment, if at all possible. For the handing on of a lighted candle, a parent takes the candle from the box and lights it from the paschal candle to avoid passing an object. The ephphatha rite is omitted.

Confirmation
The bishop may grant priests the faculty to confirm those baptized in the Catholic Church, thus avoiding the need for the bishop to travel across the diocese. While not ideal, if time is an issue, confirmation may be celebrated outside of Mass.13 For the rite of confirmation itself, the following are suggested: Cloth face coverings or masks are worn by all participants, as at any liturgy. Sponsors should maintain the prescribed distance (and avoid placing the right hand on the shoulder). While not part of the rite, some bishops will impose hands on each candidate before the consecratory prayer. This ought to be avoided in this context. Current wisdom is that the anointing itself may not be done with an instrument.14 Therefore, the oil must be wiped off and the thumb cleansed with sanitizer between candidates. The sign of peace is exchanged verbally.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
Catechumens and candidates, and those who have accompanied them, are no doubt anxious to celebrate the sacraments of initiation. Once churches are opened for public worship, the candidates for full communion may be received and confirmed as seating and time constraints allow.

Though the initiation of catechumens normally takes place at the Easter Vigil, in rare circumstances the sacraments may be celebrated outside of the usual time.15 Given that these circumstances have affected the entire diocese, it is most appropriate for the bishop to establish an alternate date for the full initiation of the catechumens in his diocese; or he may choose to delegate that decision to pastors. Initiation on a Sunday is preferred; the Sunday Mass or, in Ordinary Time, the ritual Mass “For the Conferral of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation: For the Conferral of Baptism” (I, 3) may be used. The Easter Vigil liturgy is not used.

The number of scrutinies celebrated prior to the suspension of public liturgies depended on the location of the parish. In some dioceses, none of the scrutinies were celebrated, while in other dioceses all or some of the scrutinies were celebrated. The bishop may dispense the elect from two of the three scrutinies. Once a date for initiation is set, if necessary, any remaining scrutinies are celebrated. They may be celebrated—attentive to time...
and physical distancing—on a Sunday or even on a weekday, within Mass or in the context of a Liturgy of the Word. The same is true for the presentations of the creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Depending on the number of elect in a parish, the elect may need to be initiated individually or in small groups across a series of Masses on the assigned weekend, or even into the following week. Or, if the group is small enough, a separate Mass for the catechumens may be scheduled.

For the rite itself, the recommendations are the same as for the baptism of children. The vesting in a white garment is omitted in order to avoid passing items between persons. The godparent retrieves and lights the candle (it is not handed to them) the catechumen then grasps a different part of the candle. Confirmation is celebrated as previously described.

**Weddings**

To keep the liturgy to a safer length, weddings outside of Mass are suggested. The second form of the entrance, with the minister awaiting the couple in the sanctuary, would be preferred. An entrance procession may take place if distances of six feet can be maintained. Consideration should be given to the number in the wedding party and to avoiding extra movement. For example, only the bride and groom need to come forward for the rite; any other attendants, including the two witnesses, can remain in their places. Only the couple should handle the rings, placing them on a tray (especially if they will be sprinkled) or holding them in their hands for the blessing. If a tray is used, the couple take the rings from the tray rather than a minister or witness handing the rings to them. The **lazo** may be handled the same way. Because the **lazo** requires others to impose it, it is omitted.

Some couples may have exchanged vows at a small wedding with just the canonical witnesses and a few guests present. What might be done for these couples now, should they desire to celebrate their marriage with more guests present? While vows are not repeated, one option may be to adapt the “Order for the Blessing of a Married Couple” on occasions other than an anniversary from the **Book of Blessings**.

**Funeral Rites**

Celebrating funerals in the context of this pandemic poses a particular challenge. Of the times when physical distancing is most difficult to bear, this would have to be among the most painful and will stretch the pastoral skills of any minister. If the number of individuals wishing to take part in the rites is more than the church or funeral home can accommodate, one solution might be for some mourners to attend the vigil, others the funeral liturgy, and others the committal.

Some common practices may need to be reconsidered; for example, ministers may want to avoid touching the body at the vigil. This recommendation applies also when the cause of death is other than COVID-19. The principle of avoiding common objects would suggest omitting the placement of the pall or the Christian symbols. If the pall is used, only one person should handle it. Laundering the pall after the liturgy, or, given the estimated length of time the virus is found on surfaces, waiting three days to use it again would be beneficial. The incensing of the casket is omitted if a six-foot distance from worshippers cannot be maintained.

As restrictions loosen, many families whose loved ones could not have a funeral will request a memorial Mass. Pastors will need to best discern how to meet these needs while also respecting canonical norms that limit the number of Masses a priest may celebrate on a given day. It may be most prudent, for as long as it is necessary, to set one Mass aside each day as a funeral or memorial Mass. Other parishioners might attend as space allows. At the same time, consideration should be given to celebrating the funeral liturgy outside of Mass, both in terms of time restrictions, and to allow a respite for the priest.

**Technology and Outdoor Liturgies**

As communities begin to gather again for public worship, consideration may be given to celebrating the liturgy outdoors, with worshipers distanced in their seating or all or some of the assembly seated in their cars. Likewise, the parking lot may be considered as “overflow” seating, with families taking part in the liturgy via electronic media (livestream or radio) and joining in the Communion procession at the proper time.

Certain issues need attention when the liturgy is celebrated outdoors. Those assisting with traffic control should wear brightly colored vests. If worshipers attend the service in their cars, they will need to be properly distanced from each other. If windows are open, cloth face coverings will need to be worn. Car engines should not be running, both for the health of those in the vicinity and for the sake of the environment. Finally, outdoor liturgies or even using the parking lot as overflow seating should be avoided if storms are in the area. Parishes should be attentive to the level of volume from the liturgy that might affect the neighborhood, and informing those who live nearby of plans to celebrate outside would be appropriate.

When the liturgy is celebrated outside, live audio will need to be provided. The equipment required will differ from parish to parish, depending on specific needs, existing equipment, and the costs involved. Local technical expertise will be required, and, in some cases, professional assistance will be needed.
ample sound, there are two options: a public address (PA) system or AM radio broadcasting.

A PA system essentially consists of a large portable speaker with an amplifier. A power source is required to amplify the sound from an external input such as a microphone or an audio input from the church’s sound system. Some systems have a built-in battery so they can operate away from a power source. A PA system is a good solution for a small-to medium-sized area, and may include one or multiple speakers. The higher the wattage of the system, generally speaking, the louder it can be. Parishes may also want to consider the ability to connect speakers or connect to the church’s sound system (look for an auxiliary, or AUX-In, port). Some systems come with microphones. A parking lot may be too large or shaped in such a way as to make the use of a PA system impractical. A possible alternate solution would be the use of a low-powered AM broadcasting unit, allowing people in their cars to tune to an AM station and listen to the liturgy.

CONCLUSION

New information about the virus and its spread comes to light daily, and, as a result, practices described in this article may need to be changed or abandoned. There is no “safe” liturgy in the age of COVID-19. But with patience, perseverance, and cooperation, parishes can prepare a liturgy that is safer for those who choose to take the risk of assembling for worship.

Notes

1. Since this article focuses on the public celebration of the rites with a gathered assembly, reconciliation and pastoral care to the sick and dying (including the anointing of the sick) will not be discussed. For guidance on celebrating these sacraments, see the Diocese of Davenport’s reopening procedures: https://www.davenportdiocese.org/documents/2020/5/Re-Opening%20Churches%20in%20the%20Diocese%20of%20Davenport.pdf.

2. The Diocese of Davenport envisions a three-step strategy: opening the churches for visits, limited public worship, and then softening some of those limits once community spread of the virus has ceased. Our current plan does not envision return to “normal” worship practices until there is evidence of herd immunity to SARS-CoV-2. For Davenport’s procedures, see the link in footnote no. 1.


5. GIRM, 62–63.

6. The GIRM says it is to be sung. However, in other places in the Missal, speaking texts that are normally sung is permitted. Such would apply here.

7. GIRM, 66.

8. GIRM, 70.

9. GIRM, 73. See Introduction to the Order of Mass (USCCB, 2003), 107.

10. GIRM, 154, 181.


14. See the Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation, promulgated by Pope Paul VI. A dubium has been sent by the USCCB to the Vatican asking for clarification on this matter.


16. Book of Blessings, 107–134. Appendix III from the Order of Celebrating Matrimony, because it pertains to main anniversaries, would not be used.

17. The CDC has now published guidance for individuals and families planning or attending a funeral; see: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/_funeral-guidance.html.


20. “Drive-through” Communion seems to create too big a divide between Communion and the rest of the liturgy, raises a number of practical and safety issues, and—importantly—fuses the image of “fast food” with the Eucharist.

21. If the parking lot is used for overflow seating while the liturgy is being celebrated inside, then the use of livestreaming is recommended.

22. As an alternative to livestreaming, this setup may be used if the liturgy is being celebrated indoors but the parking lot is being used for overflow seating.

23. AM transmitters can be FCC approved for non-licensed use as a low-powered AM station, and have the appropriate range (though a range-extending antenna may be needed).

Deacon Francis L. Agnoli, OFS, MD, DMin, is the director of the Office of Liturgy and the director of deacon formation for the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa.

At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL: http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/resources/MinimizingRisksAtTheLiturgy.pdf.